DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 459 747 IR 058 241

AUTHOR	Floistad, Brit
TITLE	Establishing a Research Service in the Norwegian Parliament: Why the Right Time Was Now.
PUB DATE	2001-08-00
NOTE	7p.; In: Libraries and Librarians: Making a Difference in the Knowledge Age. Council and General Conference: Conference Programme and Proceedings (67th, Boston, MA, August 16-25, 2001); see IR 058 199.
AVAILABLE FROM	For full text: http://www.ifla.org.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Foreign Countries; *Government Libraries; *Library Development; Library Services; Reference Services; *Research Libraries; User Needs (Information); Users (Information)
IDENTIFIERS	Norway; Parliamentarians; *Parliamentary Libraries

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the establishment of a research service in the Norwegian parliament. The first section presents some general assumptions regarding a research service in parliament. The second section describes the first initiative, a mandate in the 1970s to establish a commission to clarify the need for such a service. The third section introduces the process of establishing the research service in the late 1990s. The fourth and fifth sections discuss a newspaper debate among politicians on this issue that began when the opposing parties stated that they did not fully trust the government's handling of a certain matter. The sixth section summarizes the commission's report on the "why" and "how" of establishing a research service. The seventh section describes the establishment of the research service in October 1999. (MES)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 459 747

67th IFLA Council and General Conference August 16-25, 2001

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

A.L. Van Wesemael

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

1

Code Number: 066-103-E
Division Number: I
Professional Group: Library and Research Services for Parliaments
Joint Meeting with: -
Meeting Number: 103 (Panel 1)
Simultaneous Interpretation: -

Establishing a research service in the Norwegian parliament: why the right time was now

Brit Fløistad
Head, Research Service of Norwegian Parliament
Oslo, Norway

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

General assumptions regarding a research service in parliament

Let me start with a few general assumptions regarding the establishing of a research service in parliament that in my view were relevant in establishing such a service in the Parliament of Norway.

Firstly the fact that research services were established in other parliaments, not least in the neighbouring country Sweden, played a role in raising the question of such a service in the Norwegian parliament as well.

Secondly the well-known fact that parties in opposition are more likely to initiate a strengthening of the parliament's own expertise characterised the Norwegian process as well. It seemed, however, that being in opposition was in itself not sufficient. The party with the tradition of being the ruling party, in Norway's case, the Labour Party, seemed in general more sceptical to a body of experts in the parliament, even when in opposition. For the more traditional opposition, the coalition parties, it also took a while before an initiative was taken, and then it was related to a particular incidence where the opposition expressed a certain lack of confidence in the government's provision of information to parliament.

Thirdly such factors as frequent changes in government and, not least minority governments, both factors calling for a parliament with more initiatives, characterised Norwegian politics at the time a research service in parliament was initiated and established.

IR058241

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Last, but not least, the increase in scope and complexity in issues dealt with in parliament that had made the need for expert assistance in parliament more obvious, became an important element in the Norwegian debate as well. This was demonstrated by the fact that when a research service was actually established in October 1999, all parties were in favour.

The first initiative

When the Norwegian Parliament in the mid 1970s had a thorough examination of its administrative rules and procedures, one question – among many other and more extensive ones – was a research service for members of parliament. Reference was made to such services in other parliaments such as the American Congress, the House of Commons and particularly the service in the neighbouring Swedish parliament. At that time the latter had been in existence for almost 15 years and experienced a steady increase in its requests.

It was at this point not recommend to actually establish a research service in the Norwegian parliament, but rather to set up a special commission – a well known political means when you are not yet prepared for the final decision – to look into the matter. More specifically the mandate was to clarify a potential need for such a service in the Norwegian parliament, bearing in mind the strong tradition in the Norwegian political system of ministries having to bring forward all relevant material and background information on issues brought before parliament. This has been used to argue that the need for a research service for the members of parliament is less in our country.

A commission was, however, not established. It has not been possible to find out exactly why, except that an election took place before it was dealt with in parliament, and members less interested might have been elected. The main reason is most likely that the same political party - the Labour party – with a long tradition of being the ruling party came back into power with an increase in their mandate. Members of this party would be less inclined to strengthen the parliament's own expertise, not least because there also was a general scepticism about such a body in this party.

The argument at this point was that too little was known about the actual need for a research service in parliament, and also that too little was known about services and assistance already available to Members of Parliament, such as library and archives, indicating an inclination towards describing the present situation as more or less satisfactory.

Even though the main scepticism about experts in parliament had come from the Labour party, such scepticism was found in other parties as well. I can myself remember a debate on television in the 1980s between a prominent member of a right and a professor from the Institute of Political Science about parliamentarians making more use of researchers and university people in their political work. The Member was very clear in his view about not having "experts taking over politics" as he put it, and in stressing that in politics it is the judgement and opinions of the politicians themselves that count. This is an example that there may also be parliamentarians who on a personal basis, are sceptical about the role of experts in politics.

The process of establishing a research service

After this small attempt in the late 1970s, the issue was not put on the agenda in the Norwegian parliament until the latter part of 1990s. In the 1980s Norway had changing governments, that is between the Labour party and a coalition government. The longest period was with a coalition

government, and as it is the opposition that normally would raise the question of strengthening the parliament, an initiative should then have come from the Labour party. As indicated above, this party had a general scepticism about experts taking part in politics, and this, together with their tradition for being, and the anticipation of soon becoming, the ruling party, made such an initiative less likely.

A newspaper debate

Prior to the issue of a research service in the Norwegian parliament becoming an issue in the parliament in the latter part of the 1990s, a newspaper debate among politicians on this issue a few years earlier gave an indication of what the arguments would be. At this time the Labour party was back as the ruling party and the debate was initiated by a member of one of the opposition parties. His main argument was the need for expertise in parliament in order for parliament not to depend too much on the expertise of ministries, relating this to the constitutional principle of the division of power. The argument of independence for parliament was also related to various interest organisations, more precisely to the fact that such organisations, supplying important information to Members of Parliament, at the same time had an agenda of their own.

While some politicians taking part in the newspaper debate shared these views, others warned against what was described as the power of experts within parliament having an undue influence on the political process. Even though the need for expertise was acknowledged, there was some scepticism about a body of experts with the parliament itself.

Before looking more closely at the arguments when the issue actually came on the agenda in parliament, I will deal with what brought up the issue of a research service in the Norwegian parliament, and started the process that finally led to the establishment of such a service.

The opposition suggests a special commission

What started it was actually an incident where the opposition parties stated that they did not fully trust the governments handling of a certain matter. More precisely, the opposition claimed that the government had tried to unduly influence the opinions of civil servants being members of a special commission set up by the Ministry of Environment to look into the matter of so called "green taxation". This raised the general question of having civil servants as members of special commissions, but it at the same time revived the question of parliament's need for independent expertise. More precisely, the opposition parties in parliament suggested that a special commission should be set up to look into both questions. For the latter, the mandate was more precisely to look into the need to strengthen parliament's own expertise.

In other words one might say that the question of a research service in the Norwegian parliament came on the agenda because the opposition felt that it could not always rely on the government's supply of information, in spite of the minister's duty to inform, referred to above. Another important factor was that the political situation in parliament at that time was such that when all the opposition parties - to the right as well as to the left - agreed on setting up such a commission, they had the majority. The party in power - being at this time the Labour party - had to accept that a commission was established, even though they voted against it.

In the debate the difference in opinion between the opposition parties having put the issue on the agenda and the government party, came out very clearly. While the former stressed the

parliaments' need for independent expertise, the Labour party expressed their scepticism by arguing that a body of experts could be too dominant and thus play a role in determining the political agenda. They also pointed to the fact that as the rules of procedure gave parliament the right, at any time, to utilise external experts, a body within parliament was not necessary. Also the parties in favour of strengthening the parliament's own expertise indicated that this did not necessarily mean the establishment of a research service in parliament. This was pointed to as one option, while another option put forward was to strengthen the secretariats in the political groups and in the committees. The larger part of the members in favour of strengthening the expertise in parliament did however see the need for a separate body that could be of use not only to the members, but to the party secretariats and the committees as well.

When the special commission was established it was with members from seven parties in parliament, including the Labour party, and when on April 30th 1997 the commission after six month's work, concluded that a strengthening of parliaments' own expertise was needed, and that a research service should be established, all parties stood behind this conclusion.

This debate when setting up the commission was actually the only debate on the issue. When the commission in 1997 came forward with its report, the report was not put before parliament but just accepted by the Speaker and put into effect.

It is thus this debate, and not least the commission's report, that indicates firstly why the members wanted a research service and secondly what their ideas of such a service would be, and thus has been an important source when actually setting up the service.

What this process shows then is the well known fact that it is the opposition in parliament that is most likely to take the initiative for strengthening the parliament's expertise and thus make the members less dependent on the ministries. This of course makes sense as the party in power will have direct access to information from the ministries and, secondly, will have little interest in trying to challenge the government's policy. The process also shows, that at least in Norway, being in opposition was not enough, which may have to do with the tradition mentioned earlier about ministers' duty to fully inform parliament. An incident that raised doubt about this tradition was what finally put the issue of strengthening the parliament's own expertise on the agenda.

What this process also shows is that eventually parties both in government as well as in opposition came to the conclusion that parliament ought to have its own research service. This may have to do with the fact that the party in opposition today may be in government tomorrow and vice versa. And this is exactly what happened.

At the time the research service was actually established in October 1999, the parties having initially taken the initiative had now formed a coalition government, and one can only speculate if they would have argued as hard for a research service at that stage. Judging from the arguments and conclusions in the report, it seemed that the question of strengthening the parliament's own expertise by now was an issue that all parties could agree on.

Since March last year the Labour party has been back in government, meaning that the research service, since it started in October 1999 has seen two changes in government and thus has been used by parties initially sceptical about a research service, as well as parties in favour. Our

statistics show that even though the Labour party used the research service more then twice as much when they were in opposition, it is the more traditional opposition parties that have been the more heavy users with a difference in requests of almost one to ten from being in government as to being in opposition.

The report from the special commission

As indicated above the commission's conclusion to strengthen the parliament's own expertise was supported by members from all parties. In the report are found the arguments for establishing a research service; that is the *why* as well as some aspect on the actual shaping of such a service, that is the *how*.

As to the why, the commission pointed to three main aspects. First the increase in, and the complexity of, issues before parliament, referring particularly to the fact that compared to many other parliaments, the Norwegian parliament often deals with rather specific issues. A second and very important aspect was the increase in parliament's own initiative. A political situation characterising Norwegian politics at this stage with ,more frequent changes in government, and not least with governments not having the majority in parliament, made for a more active opposition, which in turn created a need for its own expertise. A third aspect is the increase in members' external relations, that is international organisations as well as their constituencies.

As to the how, the commission did not get into any detail about the actual shaping of the research service. But it was indicated that it should be a separate unit; not part of the parliamentary library but utilising the library's resources and thus being located in its vicinity. The service should consist of 5 to 7 researchers in such fields as law, political science, history and economics and should assist the members in all their various fields of work. It was indicated that the research service would be particularly useful to members with less access to the party secretariats, that is the backbenchers. The research service should also assist the party secretariats and the committees. Last but not least the commission stressed the political impartiality of such a service.

Establishing the research service in October 1999

As indicated earlier, it is what was expressed in the debate in parliament when setting up the special commission as well as what was actually said in the report, that has been the main "tool" when actually establishing a research service in the Norwegian parliament.

Being in charge of establishing the research service, I would have preferred that the report had been put before parliament, and thus have had a "fresher" debate on the issue when planning and establishing the new service. Such a debate would have given some indications as to the members' needs and expectations, and also implied that most members had been aware that a research service was being established. As it was we had to take into account that many members did not know about the service, and not least that there might be various opinions and expectations as to what was expected of such a service. We thus saw it as a special challenge to inform members about this new service, as well as finding out what their expectations of such a service might be.

I will use the last part of my presentation to explain how we dealt with this challenge as well as saying a few words about our main experience to date along with what we still see as challenges ahead.

As for making the service known in parliament, we of course produced some written material with some background information, describing the service in terms of a Who can use the service, What can we do, How can we be contacted and Who are we. This was distributed to all members, party secretaries and committees, as well as on our intranet homepage. While these were very obvious things to do, we saw that it was not sufficient. We felt that some sort of dialogue with the members was necessary. We therefore contacted the various parties and more or less invited ourselves to one of their party meetings. As this initiative was positively received, it gave us a unique chance both to introduce ourselves and to discuss the new service with our potential users. We saw it as very important to do this at an early stage, stressing very clearly that our objective was to create a service to fit the needs and expectations of members, and thus having an open mind as to what that might be. This was very useful, not least to help get the message across that a request did not have to be ready formulated or in a written form, but that we would be open for more informal discussions as well.

During the almost 2 years we have been in operation we have had a total of about 430 requests from members, party groups and committees. We have so far been able to meet the deadlines, sometimes by discussing a certain reduction in the scope of a request. But with a total of only 5 people, we realise that at a certain point, we may meet a situation where we have problems responding to all the requests.

Let me end by saying that we have a definite feeling of meeting a need in the parliament. The number of requests and the positive feedback we receive are indications of this. But at the same time we feel that there are still many challenges ahead. We still need to get some more feedback from our users in order to make sure that we are supplying the kind of information and knowledge that he or she actually needs and not least in a form that best suits each one. The second major challenge is that we manage to keep ourselves updated and informed in order to make sure that the quality of our products is as good as possible. Lastly we have the ongoing issue of where to draw the line between science and politics. When we introduced ourselves in one of the party rooms and stressed that we would not deal with the political aspects of an issue, the reaction was that that was impossible in a political setting like a parliament, indicating that politics is implicit in all the requests. Our experience is of course that some issues are more political than others, and for these issues it is important to have such political aspects in the back of our mind when dealing with the request. This implies, for instance, that we must be particularly aware of what sources we use, to what extent we conclude or give various alternatives and, not least, not letting what we know about political preferences of the actual party or member influence our work. Such awareness is not least important as our papers go directly into the political process more often that we initially had anticipated.

As I assume that our experience as well as our challenges are very much the same as those found in research services in other parliaments, I have been looking forward to this opportunity to discuss with you various aspects of parliamentary research service.